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## A Comparative Study Between Chinese and English Refusals

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### Abstract

This article adopts the Discourse Completion Test as the data collection instrument, taking 80 students as its subjects. It mainly focuses on the pragmatic strategies between the two groups, that is to say, the different refusal strategies of the interlocutors. The investigation shows that differences still exist in term of the degree of indirectness. Besides, differences still exist in term of the degree of indirectness. Then it draws the conclusion that the differences of refusal speech act are based on different cultures, furthermore it lays the basis for the the English teaching and second language acquisition.

**Key words:** Refusals; Speech act; Pragmatic differences; Strategies

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### INTRODUCTION

In communication people usually do nothing more than speak to one another. Sometimes people have to fumble for the right words to express the right words to express a certain attitude, while on other occasions we have to pause to decipher what others say. Speech act is mainly concerned with the illocutionary acts that usually happen in our daily life in the form of request, compliment, apology, promise, compliment, and refusal.

Among other speech acts, the speech act of refusal is a very common act in our daily life. Although sometimes we

have to make refusal to others, we may still feel somewhat reluctant. It is mainly because refusal is a face threatening act. According to Brown and Levinson (1978), *face* is “a public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself”. When we refuse others, the interlocutor’s face may be threatened more or less. The speech act of refusal is face-threatening and needs a high level of pragmatic competence in that it involves telling a listener something he or she doesn’t want to hear, thus it requires the speaker to give support and help the listener avoid embarrassment.

However compared with other speech acts, relatively fewer studies are made on refusals although it is a more typical example of face threatening act. In order to make up for the vacancy in pragmatics, the following thesis is concerned with the performance of the speech act of refusal, one of the most important pragmatic competences.

### 1. LITERATURE REVIEW

In comparing and analyzing the Chinese and English speech acts, cross-cultural pragmatics is a relatively new direction of pragmatics. By comparing pragmatic differences among different cultures’ speech act, we can draw different conclusions.

Apart from the universally accepted principles related to human conversational behavior and interaction, for example, the Cooperative Principle (CP) (Mey, 2005) and Politeness Principle (PP) (2005), Brown and Levinson’s Face Theory is also acceptable in explaining different speech act. (1987, cited in *Spenser-Oatey* 2000). They maintain that face consists of two related aspects: negative face representing the desire for autonomy, and positive face representing the desire for approval. In order to communicate thoroughly, the interlocutors need to take a certain redress strategies. But misunderstandings are often caused because of differences among them.

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the differences of refusal between Chinese and English.

The survey is carried out among a portion of students from Chinese EFL learners and native Americans of English in the form of DTC (discourse completion test) questionnaire. Through our investigations, by analyzing differences of refusal between Chinese and English, the following questions are to be answered.

How do native Chinese speaker express their refusals?

How do native English speaker express their refusals?

If there are differences, what are the causes of these differences?

What conclusions can we draw from the DTC questionnaire?

## 2. THE METHOD AND SUBJECTS OF THE SURVEY

### 2.1 Subjects

The survey is carried out through a DTC questionnaire among forty Chinese students and forty American students respectively. All of the Chinese students are EFL learners in Xi'an International Studies Universities and the American subjects are native speakers of English who are making further studies in Xi'an International Studies Universities. Among them the ratio of male to female is 1:1.

### 2.2 Investigating Method

The questionnaire is designed according to the pattern of the request questionnaire done by Blum-Kulka et al. (1984, 1989), adopting the DTC as the data collection instrument. As is shown in the following chart, the study designed different situation, with social distances, status and the difficulty of the speech act as the controlling factors.

| Situation                | Speech act | Status<br>(refer to the<br>refusee) | Social<br>distances |
|--------------------------|------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------|
| Borrow something         | Ask        | Equal                               | Near                |
| Sweeping                 | Ask        | Equal                               | Very near           |
| Ask for a leave          | Ask        | Low                                 | Far                 |
| Ask for an interview     | Ask        | Low                                 | Very far            |
| Ask for directions       | Ask        | Equal                               | Very far            |
| Ask for a promote        | Ask        | Low                                 | Far                 |
| Eat in a restaurant      | Invite     | Low                                 | Very far            |
| Invite a boss to a party | Invite     | Low                                 | Far                 |
| Eat cakes                | Provide    | Equal                               | Near                |
| Weight reducing          | Suggest    | Equal                               | Very near           |

### 2.3 Data Analysis

As to data analysis, we confer the three layers of speech act analysis provided by Blum-Kulka et al. (1984, 1989) and Wood & Kroger (1994). That is to say, Central Speech Act (CSA), Auxiliary Speech Act (ASA) and Microunit. The analysis is to categorize each different refusal speech act into different layer and consequence.

The speech act of refusal is composed of different semantic formula and each semantic component has

different role in the speech act of refusal, with the central speech act serving as the center among all speech acts of refusal.

#### 2.3.1 Central Speech Act

##### Direct Refusals

By direct refusals, we mean the reject of something without any reservation, which can be divided into two sub-categories.

##### Performatives

By the utilization of performatives means the use of utterances which have the function of performing an action.

(1) I have to refuse you.

(2) 但为了公司的利益, 我不得不拒绝你的请求。

##### Non-performatives

• Answer with “no”(不) directly

(3) No way.

(4) 不行。

• Negated willingness/ability

(5) I am afraid I can't lend this book out.

(6) 对不起, 我不能借给你。

##### Indirect refusals

Unlike direct refusals, when indirect refusals are utilized, the implied meanings are expressed through the performance of another action. According to the pragmatic functions of utterances, we divide the indirect refusal into the following categories.

##### Statement of intrinsic grounders, excuses or explanation

A most frequently used strategy by both groups is providing reasons. Giving a reason is a frequently employed refusal strategy in that the reason normally stresses prior commitment or obligations beyond the speaker's control to imply that the refusal is not the speaker's deliberate preference for non-performative compliance. Therefore, the *Mianzi* of either side is prevented from being hurt or lost.

(7) We have a really busy reschedule this week.

(8) 我很乐意帮忙, 但我现在抽不开身。

##### Statement of regret

The formulaic phrase of “I'm sorry” in English and “对不起” in Chinese, which projects a refusal and indicates relatively strong non-compliance with the interlocutor are frequently used in expressing the regret and apology to the current situation. By the utilization of them, strong expressions of refusal are exposed, which may seem impossible to negotiate (Chen et al., 1995).

(9) Sorry, we need you here.

(10) 不好意思, 我也有急事, 我叫李月帮你忙吧。

##### Offering alternatives

In consistence with Brown and Levinson's conceptualization of negative face, which advocates the avoidance of intrusion on individual and self-esteem, alternatives are provided by interlocutors. On the one hand, we can attain the aim of softening the

threatening power on the refusee. On the other hand, the acknowledgement of the interlocutor's face is shown by the refuser's concern for the interlocutor's needs.

(11) I think they have another copy in the library, use that one.

(12) 你先向别的同学借一下吧。

#### *Dissuasion*

In dissuading the interlocutor, people want to persuade the interlocutor to give up his or her action plan. The refuser expresses the consideration of the *Mianzi* of the person being refused and reminds him or her of the of the refuser's own face.

- Asking for reward

(13) \$ 5 a page.

(14) 每天付两元钱吧。

- Threat or statement of negative consequences to the requester

(15) Without you we have to close down.

(16) 其它位置不一定适合你。

- Guilt up

(17) Last time I ask to borrow your computer and you refused.

(18) 请你先把上次借的书还给我好吗?

- Criticizing or reprimanding the request or requester;

Insult or attack

(19) You shouldn't wait till the last minute.

(20) 你怎么这么不小心。

*Request for help, empathy and understanding*

(21) 请你理解。

(22) 请多多包涵。

- Letting interlocutor off the hook

(23) Don't worry about it.

(24) 不要紧。

- Self-defence

(25) I'm doing all I can do.

(26) 我已经尽力了。

- Offering to share the responsibility

(27) 我也有错。

#### *Avoidance*

Avoidance is another kind of strategy of indirect refusal, about which people have different ideas. Some even think of it as an impolite manner, for they think indirect answer only implies refusal. While in my opinion, avoidance does have some inalternative functions in conversation, especially in China.

- Cracking a joke

(28) My belly will break out.

(29) 我的胃已经开始罢工了。

- Repetition of part of speech

(30) Next Sunday?

(31) 再干一个小时?

- Making a postponement

(32) I'll think about it.

(33) 我得和其他领导商量一下。

- Hedging

(34) I'm not sure.

(35) 我们先讨论一下, 但不能保证。

- The expression of one's wish

In most cases, the refusal of English is embodied by the subjunctive mood while the Chinese refusal is made up of two parts, with the second part expressing the refusal by such conjunction as “可是” or “但是”.

(36) I wish I could help you.

(37) 我也希望加薪水, 可是现在条件不允许。

- Statement of the principle

This strategy is frequently utilized because once the principles are laid out, the interlocutor has no alternative but to give up the request.

(38) The computers are off limits to people not in the computer department.

(39) 本公司有规定, 假期不能超过两天。

- Setting condition for future or past acceptance

(40) If you had asked me earlier, I would have lent you.

(41) 要是平时我到可以借给你, 可现在我正用着哪。

- Promise of future acceptance

(42) I promise I will do it next time.

(43) 下次一定去。

- Statement of folk wisdom

The use of folk sayings is often used to express the folk wisdom.

(44) Everyone will get what they deserve in due time.

(45) 入乡随俗。

- Criticizing or educating the requester

Occasionally there exists power distance between the refuser and the person being refused. So the person of the higher level criticizes the one of the lower level not out of politeness, but for the aim of education.

(46) You didn't take care of the ones you have.

(47) 小孩子应该把精力放在学习上。

### 2.3.2 Subsidiary Speech Act

Though it is not as vital as the central speech act, it is necessary for us to discuss it, for it is mainly accepted as the strategy of mitigating or strengthening the degree of refusal. They can be utilized either before or after the central speech act. When either of the above indirect speech act appears with one direct speech act, it inevitably becomes a subsidiary speech act. The following are some other occasions of subsidiary speech act.

#### **Gratitude or appreciation**

(48) Thank you for considering me for this position.

(49) 谢谢您, 邓老板。

#### **Statement of positive opinion or agreement**

(50) A good idea.

(51) 哥, 你的主意太好了。

#### **Pause filler**

(52) Well,.....

(53) 噢, .....

### Statement of empathy or understanding

(54) I understand you are needed at home.

(55) 我了解你们的心情。

### Define relationship

(56) 谢谢您，老板。

### 2.3.3 Microunit

Among all the strategies, microunit is the least important one used in conversation. They are used to modify the central speech act and the subsidiary speech act.

#### Syntactic structure

##### *Passive voice*

The use of the passive voice can be used to avoid the refuser and the person being refused, thus the aim of face-saving is achieved.

(57) But this book is not to be borrowed.

(58) 这本书不能被借走。

##### *Transferred negation*

This kind of phenomenon only appears in English. Under some special circumstances, the negative verb is transferred from the subordinate clause to the matrix, with its function still as the negation to the predicate of the subordinate clause. Hence the negative tone is in a sense degraded.

(59) I don't feel as if I can grant you a promotion. (I feel as if I can't grant you a promotion)

##### *Double negation*

Occasionally the interlocutor answers with double negation instead of "Yes" to mitigate the degree of refusal. It is not his subjective method but the objective condition prevents him from accepting the request.

(60) 不是我不愿意……

##### *Interrogative question*

Sometimes the alternatives are provided not by the declarative question but by the interrogative question. In this way, the alternatives are provided and the degree of refusal is degraded.

(61) Can you make it within two or three?

(62) 能换个时间吗?

##### *Emphasis structure*

When the emphasis structure is in application, the illocutionary meanings are fully exposed.

(63) I do have a prior obligation.

(64) 只有你能胜任。

##### *Rhetorical question*

Occasionally the rhetorical question is used not for the opposite's response, but for the emphasis of the illocutionary meaning.

(65) Who are you to tell me what to do?

(66) 关我什么事?

##### *Tense*

On some occasions, the utilization of the past tense can often attain the aim of lessening the degree of refusal.

(67) Could we reschedule?

### Lexical method

#### *Address terms*

According to Blum-Kulka (1984, 1989), address terms are sometimes used to draw the listener's attention. In refusal speech act they are practiced to do facework. Title, first name and endearment terms are all included in this kind of strategy.

(68) I'm really sorry, Mr. Smith.

(69) 真不巧，文文，我的自行车坏了。

#### *Deixis*

According to Brown and Levinson (1978), in the performative act, the application of deixis is also a facework. By applying the deixis, the aim of avoiding of the referent is attained.

(70) I can't lend the book to anyone.

(71) 公司规定书子不能外借。

#### *Downgraders and upgraders*

This pairs are used to downgrade or upgrade the refusal speech act. The former includes understaters, hedges, subjectivizers, downtoners and appealers etc. while degree adverbs, derogatory words and commitments are all categorized in the latter.

### 2.3.4 Comprehensive Application of All Strategies

Seldom do we utilize only one of the above refusal strategies. Instead on most occasions, we choose two or more and utilize them together in the same utterance in order to achieve a certain communicative aim.

## 3. CONCLUSION

To sum up, the investigation manifested that the phenomenon of politeness was culture-specific to Chinese and English. As a result of the differences in the face orientation and the conceptualization of politeness of the Chinese and English culture, both sides hold different pragmatic norms in communication, which leads to the variations in the refusal of the speech act. Differences in the refusals provided by the Chinese and the English students are mainly reflected in the following aspects.

### 3.1 The Use of Direct Refusals

On the average, both groups utilize substantially less direct refusal strategies than indirect refusal strategies. What's more, the frequency of direct refusals differs between the two groups. On the whole, the frequency of direct refusals utilized by the American is relatively higher than that of the Chinese. Negated willingness, a relatively less used strategy is a little more frequently utilized by the American.

### 3.2 The Use of Indirect Refusals

Indirect refusals, covering a high percentage in the refusal speech act, are frequently utilized by both sides. The Chinese group is observed to utilize a slightly greater proportion of indirect versus direct strategies than that does the American. Though both sides prefer the indirect



strategies when refusing, differences still exist in term of the degree of indirectness. Superficially the refusals of the Chinese often sound softer and more indirect in general than those of the Americans, for on most occasions, they avoid the direct use of the word "No".

Among all indirect refusals, the most frequently utilized by both groups is providing reasons, with dissuasion, alternative and regret respectively serves the second, the third and the fourth strategy. Investigation has shown that the Chinese tend to present more specific reasons to higher status persons than they do to the lower status ones. This phenomenon illustrates that the Chinese demonstrate higher sensitivity to status than the American, which also reflected in their remarkable style-shift of the frequency of the politeness markers such as the apology, regret expressions and address terms.

### 3.3 Speech Act and Cultural Differences

The investigation result of the direct and indirect speech act is also in consistence with the cultural differences between the Chinese and the Americans, with the former deliberately utilize the indirect speech act in communication while the latter abides by the maxim of frankness though indirect speech act is also in full application. Americans, which are well-known for its low context culture (Hall, 1988), are much more inclined to refuse the interlocutor directly while for the high-context culture (Hall, 1988) Chinese people the result is quite different.

### 3.4 Speech Act and Second Language Acquisition

The findings of the studies will on the one hand help the language learners to be aware of the differences in performing the speech act of refusal, hence to ensure the successful exchanges in intercultural communication. On the other hand, it is an effort to enrich the current cross-cultural pragmatic research of speech acts. In a sense, it contributes to the second language acquisition.

## 4. LIMITATION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDIES

### 4.1 Limitation

This study investigates Chinese EFL learners and native Americans of English to draw the conclusions of refusal strategies by asking interviewee to respond orally to hypothetical situations. There are some limitations in this study that will be significant for the future study. It is important to point out that what people believe they would say in a given situation may be different from what they would say if the situation arose in daily interaction. In order to compare refusal strategies cross-culturally, respondents in this study were instructed to refuse the person in each situation.

If we are to enhance the validity of significant differences, we must increase the number of subjects in

each language group, and controls must be instituted in order to study the effects of varying L2 proficiency levels, length of years of learning English, status of the refuser, and other factors believed to affect the data. In this study, only the status and sex of the refuser are considered.

### 4.2 Suggestions for Further Studies

Based on the limitations of this study, some suggestions are provided for future studies.

- (1) Natural speech versus questionnaire responses.
- (2) Influence of contextual internal and external factors on the strategy use in refusals.
- (3) Amount and tone of negotiation involved in refusal.

The DCT is lack of contextual variation, a simplification of complex interactions, and the hypothetical nature of the situations. What people claim they would say in a hypothetical situation is not necessarily what they actually would say in a real situation.

Because the speech act of refusal is complex, the future study will focus on the level of directness in refusals and on the ways in which feelings of obligation and frustration affect their form and content.

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